

The ebb and flow of consumer identities: the role of memory, emotions and threats

Americus Reed II^{1,3} and Mark R Forehand^{2,3}

It is well established that consumers use their product and brand choices to signal and reinforce identities. More recently, consumer researchers have begun to focus on the dynamic nature of identity. Moving beyond the momentary effect of a given identity on behavior, newer research investigates how a constellation of identities influence each other and how this interface drives long-term consumption and behavioral patterns. Of particular interest are the processes by which an identity becomes strengthened and weakened over time — both in isolation and also with respect to other identities the consumer may hold. We review these psychological processes based on recent consumer research in the areas of memory, emotions, and threats to identity.

Addresses

¹ Whitney M. Young Jr. Professor of Marketing, Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA 19104, United States

² Pigott Family Professor of Marketing, Michael G. Foster School of Business, University of Washington, Seattle, WA 98195, United States

Corresponding authors: Reed, II Americus (amreed@wharton.upenn.edu) and Forehand, Mark R (forehand@uw.edu)

³ The authors contributed equally to this article and are listed in reverse alphabetical order.

Current Opinion in Psychology 2016, 10:94–100

This review comes from a themed issue on **Consumer behavior**

Edited by **Jeff Joireman** and **Kristina M Durante**

For a complete overview see the [Issue](#) and the [Editorial](#)

Available online 24th December 2015

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2015.12.015>

2352-250X/Published by Elsevier Ltd.

Prior research has shown that identities, whether objective and relatively stable (e.g. father, son, millennial, Hispanic, etc.), or transitory and fluid (e.g. Apple user, Democrat, lawyer, athlete, etc.) are organized as self-schemas [1,2^{••}]. When a given identity is top of mind for a consumer, identity relevant actions follow [1,3,4,5[•]]. For example, if an ‘athlete’ identity is salient, one may be more likely to observe stronger liking of athlete-focused products like Gatorade (vs. Coca Cola); more positive reactions to pro-athlete spokespeople (vs. award-winning actors) in advertisements; more attention paid to identity-relevant media like ESPN (vs. CNN); and more frequent engagement in consumption behaviors that symbolize the identity like wearing a fit-bit (vs. an Apple Watch). It is often argued that this occurs because the self-schemas are

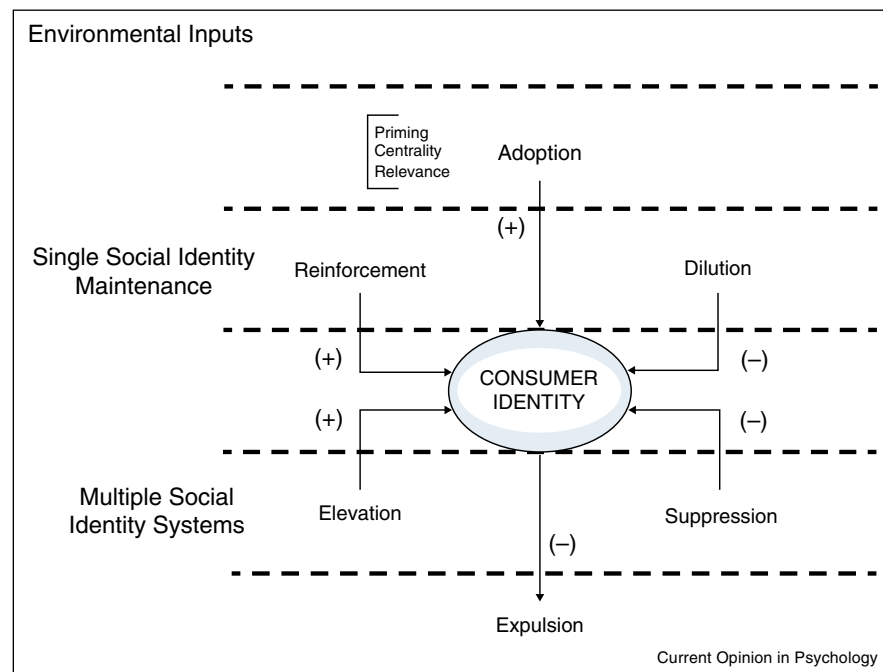
constellations of thoughts, emotions, attitudes, judgments, and behaviors that define particular identities [2^{••}]. Motivational principles of consistency ensure that when these identities are top of mind [1,3], consumers conform to the normative proscriptions that signal and embody the identity [1–3,6] and avoid those that embody and signal dissociative identities [7]. These cognitive inputs to identity are well understood and have been well documented for various different types of identities [2^{••},8].

More recently, identity scholars have argued that identity research should go beyond the simple premise that if a dimension of identity is made salient [1,3] or activated in the overall self-concept [9], attitudes, judgments, and choices consistent with the identity should follow. These theorists have argued that it is also important to deeply explore the inputs and processes by which identities interact and vie for dominance. Such an endeavor sees its origins in traditional models of the self-concept. These models have long proposed that a consumer’s myriad identities not only differ in their strength of association with the core self-concept, but are often associated (or disassociated) with one another [10]. For example, a consumer may strongly identify with being gay and being Republican despite a broader disassociation between the two identities. Although this proposition is relatively non-controversial, the potential interplay of multiple-identity systems has received scant attention within the consumer research literature relative to extensive work on the processing of solitary identities. On the rare occasions that multiple identities have been considered in concert, the results suggest a more nuanced view where the various identities compete or interact with one another [11[•],12,13].

A framework of consumer identity

To frame the current discussion of multiple-identity processing, we first present a conceptual framework that distinguishes between the processes that influence solitary identities and the processes that influence the interplay between multiple identities. This framework identifies six fundamental processes (as depicted in [Figure 1](#)), including: (A) Adoption — the process of bringing a new identity into the self-schema, (B) Reinforcement — the process of strengthening an identity over time, (C) Dilution — the process of weakening an identity over time, (D) Elevation — the process of increasing the prominence of a given identity within a hierarchy of identities, (E) Suppression — the process of reducing the prominence of a given identity within

Figure 1



Framework of identity processes based on single and multiple identity maintenance.
Source: original, based on Ref. [14].

a hierarchy of identities, and (F) Expulsion — the process of dispossession of an existing identity [14].

Although most of these processes influence the centrality of the identity within the self-concept at an absolute level, elevation and suppression are unique in their focus on the relative status of one's various identities (see Figure 1). It should also be noted that these six processes do not work in isolation from one another. For example, any activity that prompts reinforcement of an identity and thereby strengthens its association with the self-concept may simultaneously elevate the identity relative to other unaffected identities. Alternatively, repeated suppression of a given identity relative to a consumer's full identity set may not only alter its relative prominence, but may also lead to dilution at an absolute level — dilution that may be so onerous, it may trigger expulsion of that identity.

In this article, we review and comment on recent research that has implications for this framework [2^{••},14]. To organize this review, this article focuses on three relatively new streams of consumer identity research: firstly, the role of memory in shaping identity development and expression, secondly, the interplay of emotion and identity as drivers of consumer behavior, and finally, the effects of external feedback regarding one's identity (in the form of threats to the identity per se). We have

ordered these streams from an inward perspective to an outward perspective. At the most inward level, the self-concept is a memory structure composed of many identities. Memory processes therefore play a significant role in the ebb and flow of individual identities. Moving beyond this core identity structure, emotions provide a key input and feedback process that influences each of the aforementioned identity processes. Finally, at the most external level, identity threats have been shown to have discrete effects on the prominence and expression of identities.

Memory and identity

Memory is the fundamental building block upon which identity is built. It is ironic that memory has received relatively little attention within the consumer identity domain given that an entire literature in psychology has documented that self-relevant information in memory is easier to encode and retrieve [15]. In fact, one of the primary models of the self-concept is premised on the associative network model of memory [16]. Implicit in this model is the idea that a consumer's various identities are interconnected with one another and hence may interact in both activation and expression. In an early investigation on this interplay, it was observed that salient identities influence both the encoding and retrieval of identity-linked information [17^{••}]. This work found that when an identity is top of mind at both encoding and

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/879270>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/879270>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)